



UPPER HELENG

THE FOREST BELOVED BY TIME

A THOUSAND THOUSAND ISLANDS

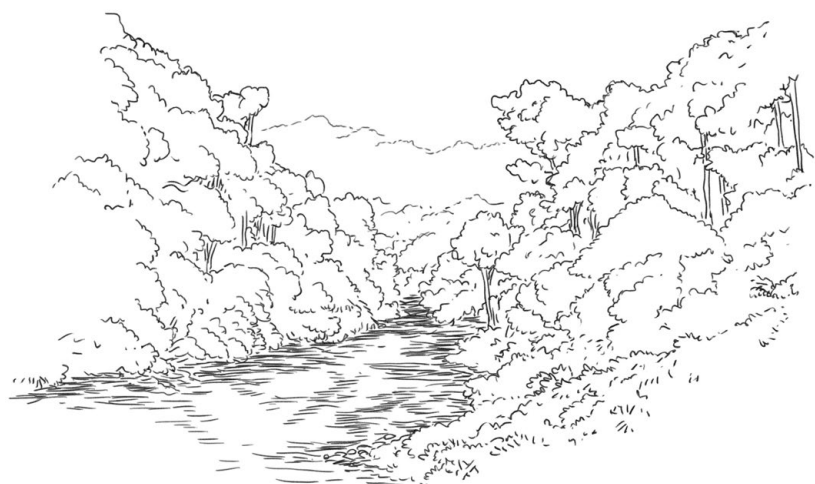
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THE FOREST BELOVED BY TIME



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A THOUSAND THOUSAND ISLANDS



FIVE DAYS, THROUGH FOGGY UPLANDS

The river forks. The sun is out. Men nap on the bank, or dice in shabby cabanas.
A young girl waves. “Guide?” she calls. “Need a guide?”



WINGSEED, JUNIOR GUIDE

A loop of vine on her arm. When she whistles it goes where she wants. She just learnt this trick, so shows it off every chance she gets.

Wingseed is in the time of the tree shrew: all talk, no filter. If you do something cool she tries to copy you, regardless of danger.



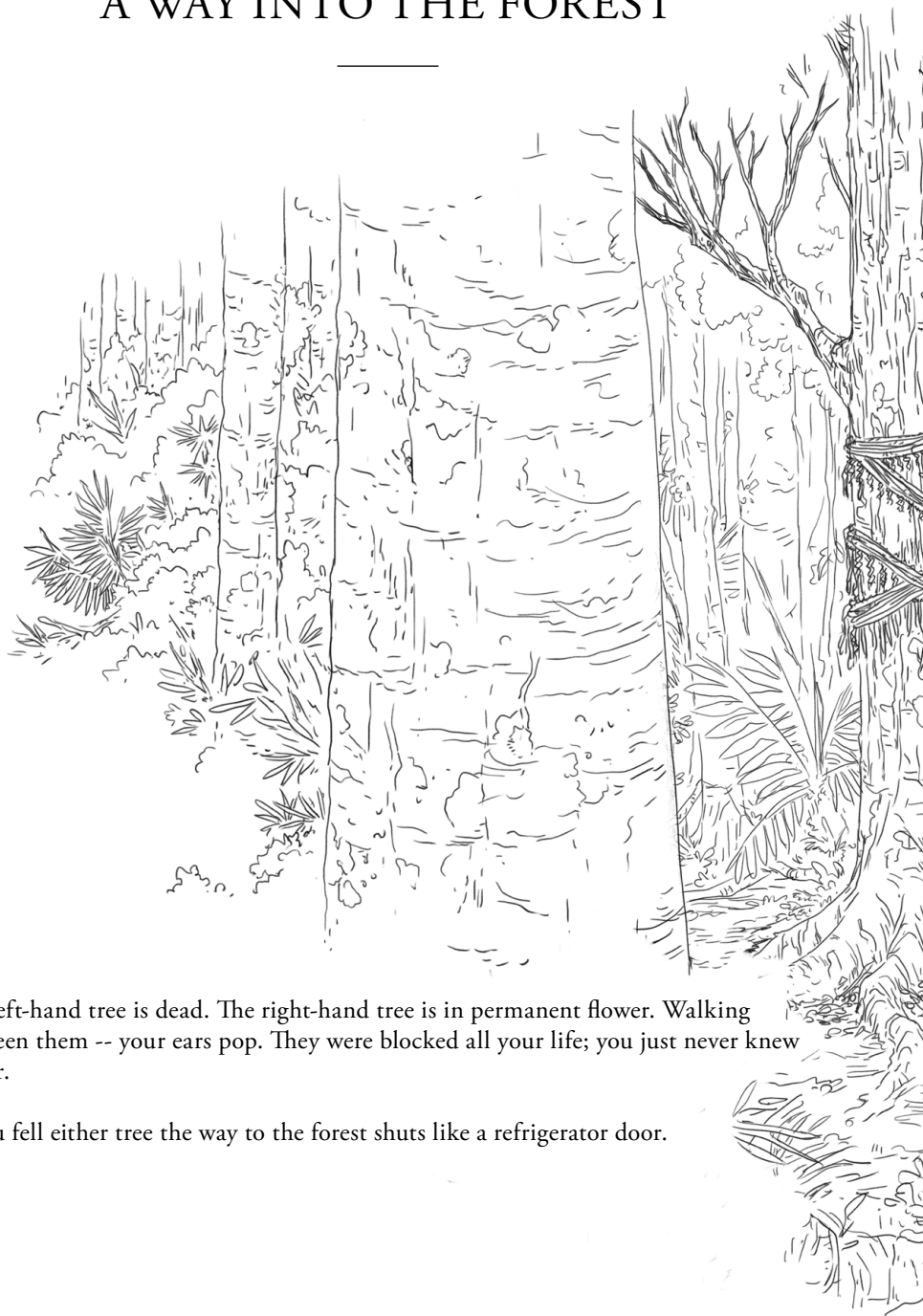
DANGLES, SENIOR GUIDE

A dog with liquid eyes. Waits for you to catch up. Never barks. “My father,” Wingseed explains. “Big blessing, a big blessing!”

To live in a dog’s shape is to live in a god’s shape. But Dangles sorely misses human things. Thumbs, for example. Or telling jokes. A dog’s shape is loyal and dependable. If he is to abandon it he must betray its natures.

He will betray you. Lead you into peril. He worries for his daughter, though. Are you competent enough to keep her safe?

A WAY INTO THE FOREST



The left-hand tree is dead. The right-hand tree is in permanent flower. Walking between them -- your ears pop. They were blocked all your life; you just never knew better.

If you fell either tree the way to the forest shuts like a refrigerator door.



THE SISTERS AND THEIR LOVERS

At the start of things there were three sisters.

The eldest sister was a spirited woman, a doer. She could never wait. Space stole her heart. She chased after him -- climbing the mountain, the branches of the forest, up into the sky, the stars her handholds.

The children of Space and the eldest sister are demons. When she returns to the world it will end. She will do it in.

The middle sister was calm, a thinker. She would never act. As she sat, cross legged in meditation, Depth embraced her. He made love to her. Out of her gushed the rivers and seas and all waters.

The children of Depth and the middle sister are all who write, all who breathe through gills, and all who build cities.

The youngest sister learned from her siblings. She waited, or acted, or did both, or did neither, as required. Time fell in love with her. Together they ripened fruit, filled honeycombs, and raised families.

The children of Time and the youngest sister are the gods and peoples of the forest.

In her dotage, as she lay dying, Time froze himself to save her. She is the forest, and she will live forever.



TIME AND THE FOREST



Outsiders sit fitfully in this eternal place. Foreign things -- gear, supplies, living creatures -- age d12 years every night. Clothes rot, swords rust, teeth fall out.

Wingseed offers you a thumb of roasted yam. "Eat forest food," she says. "Only way you stay."

ENCOUNTERS IN THE FOREST



Birdsong and insectwhine. And voices, whispering. These sound human, but are always on the edge of earshot.

"Oh ignore, ignore," Wingseed says. "Until cannot, anymore."

2 Unending chatter. Gossip squirrels. "Delicious jackfruit poison dart hunter nearly got me got gored by a boar haha serves him right!"

3 The howl of a meteor. A demon flung from heaven. Floats out of its impact crater, a sphere made of fingers, of mutagenic radiation.

4 Like chihuahua yaps through a staticky radio. Ghost deer, barking. Three-tined antler pairs, hanging in mid-air, atop invisible bodies.

5 “St-st-stay back!” the man says, moving in avian bobs and jerks. A beak sticks out of the hole in his chest. A parasitic hornbill, nesting.

6 Heavy plodding. Pot-bellied yam-men. Furred with needle roots. Let these pierce your skin? Toxic alkaloids poison your bloodstream.

7 You hear nothing out of the ordinary. Leeches stalk you. Larger than otters. Quicker too, and quieter. Will strike when your guard slips.

8 Wheezing. All leechspawn have bad lungs, because of their poor construction. “Help!” rasps a mousedeer. It has an old woman’s face.

9 Buzzing. Take cover! Giant mosquitoes, each bigger than a man. Heat-seeking dive bombers. Sawing proboscides that will puree flesh.

10 The crack of twigs. Quick sloths in the trees. To them time has a variable-speed dial; unless ambushed they crawl rings around you.

11 Tambourine din. Decades ago, a fugitive prince decided to build his kingdom, here. He and his soldiers are lichenous skeletons, now.

12 Swish swash, a stick figure, sashaying. The rattan spirit. Weaves his namesake into any form you want. Asks for a living sacrifice.

If you roll doubles a party of forest people are also present, knife- and blow-pipe-armed, hunting. Staunch pacifists. The forest can do murder on their behalf.



VISITORS TO UPPER HELENG



SADUSHAN SAN DI, QUESTING PRINCE

Princess Qaidun once fought the leech god of Upper Heleng. Leeches took her face. Now nobody knows what Queen Qaidun looks like.

Sadushan believes he will be rewarded handsomely for returning his liege-lady's likeness. But the leeches have taken many faces. How will he recognise hers?



SRI JAHISHA, ITINERANT SWORDFISH

She struck a deal with Sahong, the fisherman who caught her. She would lend him magic. In return, he would serve as steed and squire.

Fed a diet of swordfish vomit, Sahong is one of the strongest men alive. The pair roam the uplands; Sri Jahisha wishes to see the un-oceaned world.

THE PEOPLE OF THE FOREST



Kind and condescending, like kindergarten teachers managing children. “Yes,” they say. “Of course we will try praying to your one true god.”

THE PEOPLE AND PLACE

Forest nomads, in d20 days they break camp. For now, here they are: a dozen families; bamboo and palm-thatch huts; and:



- 1 A smouldering pit. In it are the charred parts of children. Their skulls are orbs of bone: no nasal cavities, no jaws, no sockets.
- 2 An ensorcelled tree. Its fruit swell before your eyes. Ripe, these mangoes are cure-alls -- but as you watch they are already rotting.
- 3 A grave, freshly dug. The people do not bury their dead. This was a missionary priest. He came, was maimed, and he perished.

4 A rhino god, visitant. Bipedal, shaggy, armoured. Squeaky voice. Trading forest produce and gossip. A touch of his horn is death.

5 A jewelpox outbreak. Cysts the size of thumbs. Virulent, permanently disfiguring -- but the pus within mineralizes into blood-red jade.

6 A woman, staring. Possessed by the eldest sister, she is sick with holy lust. Will try everything to fuck you. It is sacrilege to give in.

7 Hobbling. Everybody moves as if their left legs are wooden beams. The leech god has cursed this camp. It has taken their knees.

8 A woman, cross-legged. Enveloped in vines, moss on her chest. Possessed by the middle sister, she hasn't moved in ten years.

9 Traps. Punji stakes and nets and ooze pits. Menaced by a serial killer -- formerly a community member, now in the time of the tiger.

10 Wild dancing. They honour the youngest sister: the forest, their mother. All of marriageable age are married to all else, for a night.









LOCALS



TITTERTIT, CAMP CHIEF

The time of the macaque is a time of wisdom, plus zero fucks to give. It belongs to the elderly. Tittertit is over seventy.

Her monkeys know useful spells: Move Through Earth, Wood To Gold, Command Animals. Eat a monkey's faeces? You learn its spell. This is what it tells you, at least.



SCOFFSYRUP, HERB WOMAN

A heavy user of beakroot extract, which is turning her into a bird. Her campmates refuse to gather more. She turns to you, for help.

Claims to be in the time of the kite. Waxes philosophical about soaring free. Actually in the time of the ant; her obsession with freedom grounds her.



IRONLUNG, BLOWPIPE ACE

If you are guideless he might approach you, in the forest. His tread is silent. Never hunches, never out of breath. Never misses.

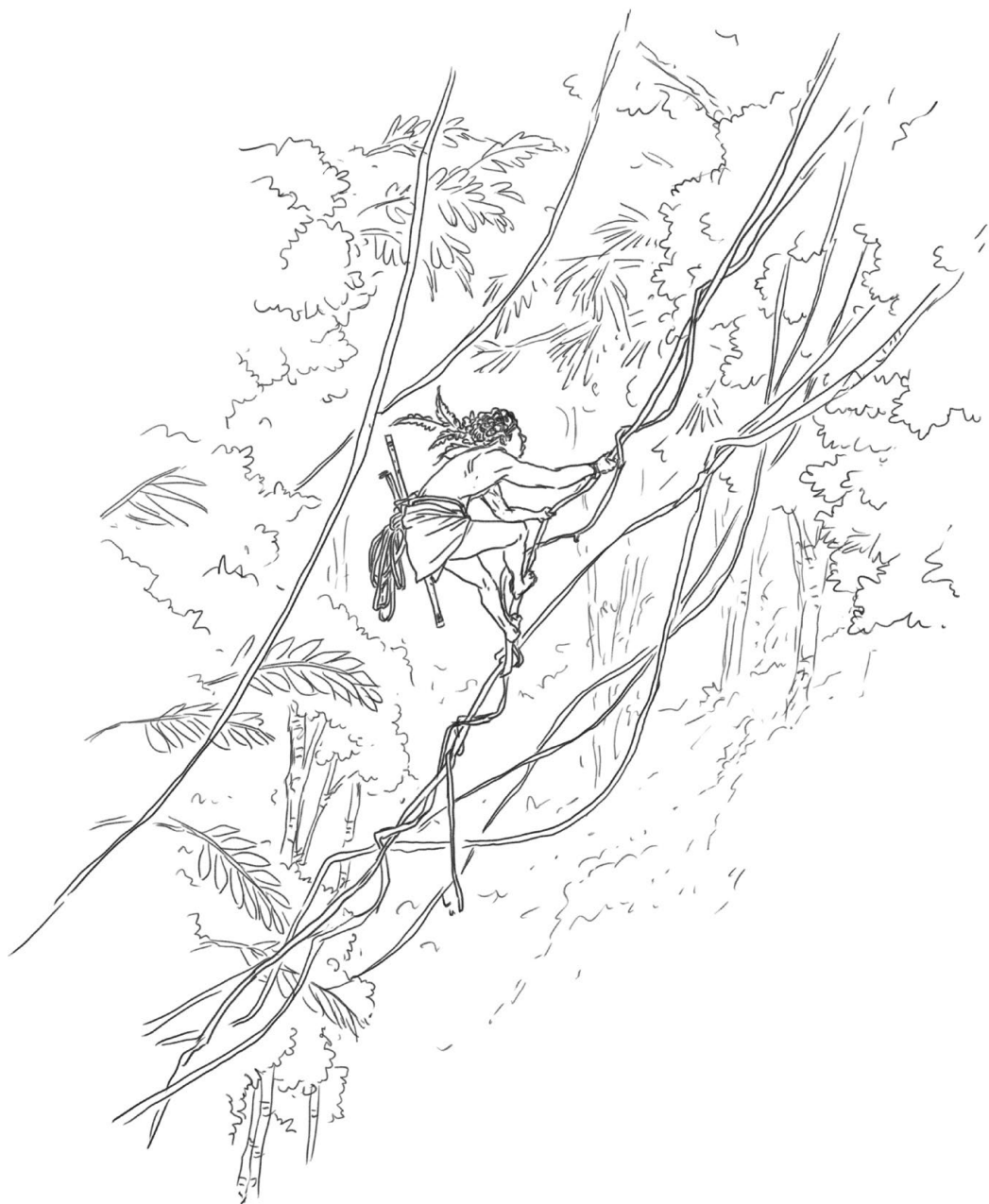
“Running out of dart poison,” he says. Will you get him some? Wants to kill the camp that exiled him. “Did me wrong.” In the time of the tiger, the anathema.



GEMTEETH, MARTIAL MASTER

Gemteeth and Ironlung were brothers. Then Reedy chose Gemteeth as her lover -- and Ironlung killed her in a jealous fit.

Fells a tree with one knifehand strike. But cannot deflect a blowdart out of the blind night. A paranoid mess, he begs you to bear him away.



THE PEOPLE AND TRADE

Goods decay. Cash is okay -- but they are a barter society. Precious metals are ornaments. You may see somebody in a skirt of silver coins and peridots. He wears it rarely. Too heavy.



GHOST ANTLER

Ground into powder, carved into knife handles. How you harvest them is vital. A ghost deer's antlers are infused with its final instincts, at death.

Tines from a charging beast want to cut and harm. Those from fleeing animals are cursed with failure. If taken from a mounting buck, gives orgasms.



PHANTOM VINES

Vines web the forest. They hang between the trees. Sometimes they hang in air, suspended from nothing, from the spires of cities not of this plane.

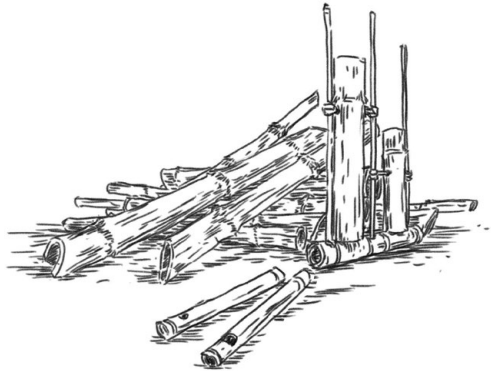
Phantom vine grows in our world, and in the others. Used as rope or made into a net, it can snare incorporeal things.



VILE PANDANUS

Demons, defeated, fall as starmetal corpses -- from which sprout the vile pandanus: an iron palm with leaves that are scimitar-blades.

A malign growth, left behind to spread mayhem. The people use it to make knives. "Don't sleep with your knife," Wingseed tells you. "Bad dreams."



WINDWORN BAMBOO

The creaking of stalks and thrashing of leaves. A clump of bamboo, forever buffeted by a localised cyclone. Wind is a vigorous lover.

It might be worth the risk, stealing his beloved. He cannot say no to her. The voice of a windworn-bamboo flute calms the worst weather.



FALSE LANGSAT

Hold a bunch in your hand, describe a meal you've had before. Now the fruits taste exactly like the food you remember -- for you, and anybody who listened.

Indistinguishable from the beige of mundane langsats. But leechspawn love them, and know how to sniff them out.

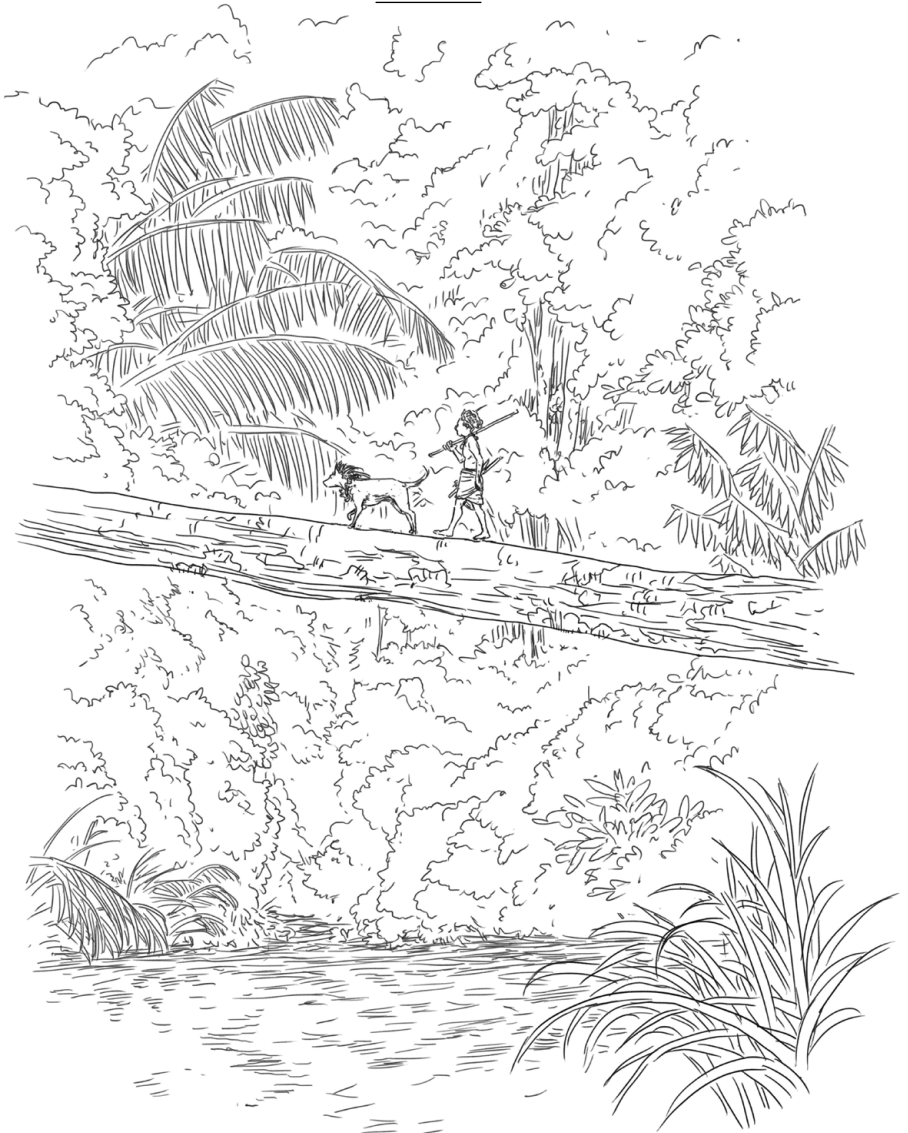


GLOWSTEEN

Juicy fluorescent flesh shining through purple rinds, like lanterns on the branch. Don't get any juice on you. It stains permanently. Its light never dims.

Pall spirits eat them, when they aren't eating people -- flecks of glowsteen in their inky masses, tumbling stars in miniature nights.

THE GODS AND TIME



The marriage between Time and the forest was fecund. There are as many gods as there are kinds of beasts.

Gods rule the seasons of the lives of man. To be in the time of the dog is to love duty. To live in the time of the kite is to soar alone, free. The boar is rash; the rhino ram-bunctious. The elephant cares for children.

THE LEECH



Firstborn god. Governs memory, loss, entropy.

The time of the leech is a species of patriotism: devotion to mother forest; an eagerness to die in her defence. Few enter the time of the leech. The forest rarely needs guarding -- and when she does, the leech god rarely needs assistance.

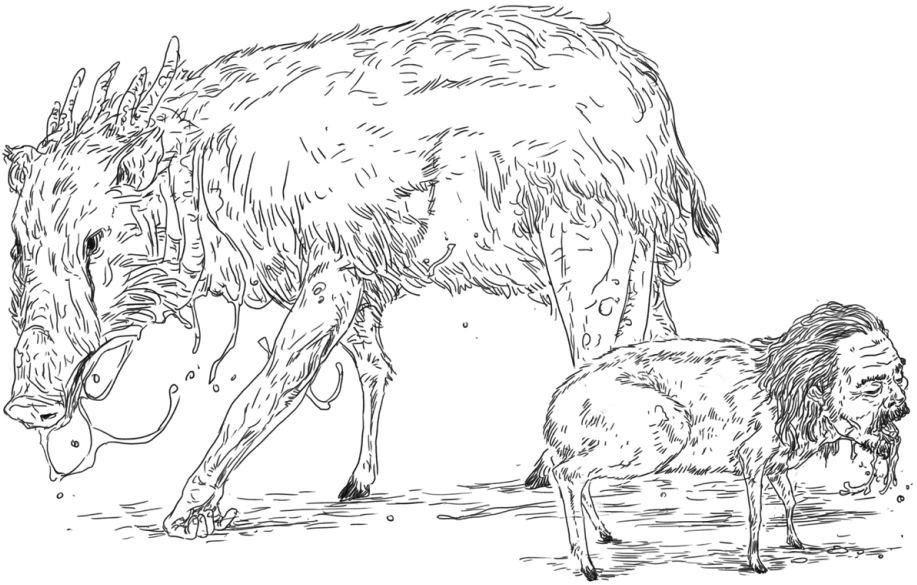
Manifests as leeches as long as your leg. They do not suck blood, when they latch on; they steal other things:



1	Your life.	11	Your big toes.
2	A cherished memory.	12	A metre of your height.
3	Your likeness.	13	Your ability to use speech.
4	An oft-used skill.	14	A hand.
5	Your eyes.	15	Your ability to feel pain.
6	A family member.	16	A limb.
7	Your ears.	17	Your gender.
8	A future child.	18	A song you love.
9	Your tongue.	19	Your left little finger.
10	A year of your life.	20	A love you know.



LEECH SPAWN



The things the leech takes are upchucked and mashed together and born from womb-mounds of muck and rotting leaves.

One may have the legs of deer. An old man's voice. It misses a pier harlot in some distant city. It is pregnant with a panther fetus.

Slay a leechspawn and all its parts return to their origins.

THE BEE



Third daughter of Time and the forest. Governs fruit and plenty.

The time of the bee is a unity of purpose. When bees are spotted, buzzing from blossom to blossom, chrome of belly and iridescent of wing, the roving families gather. All enter the time of the bee, the season of harvest.

Manifests as an ambulatory hive in the shape of a giant gibbon. The people will stalk her and hound her; scare her with fiery rituals, soothe her with lullabies.

When all her bees are smoked, when she is speared and dismembered, her honey divided up -- the time of the bee is over.

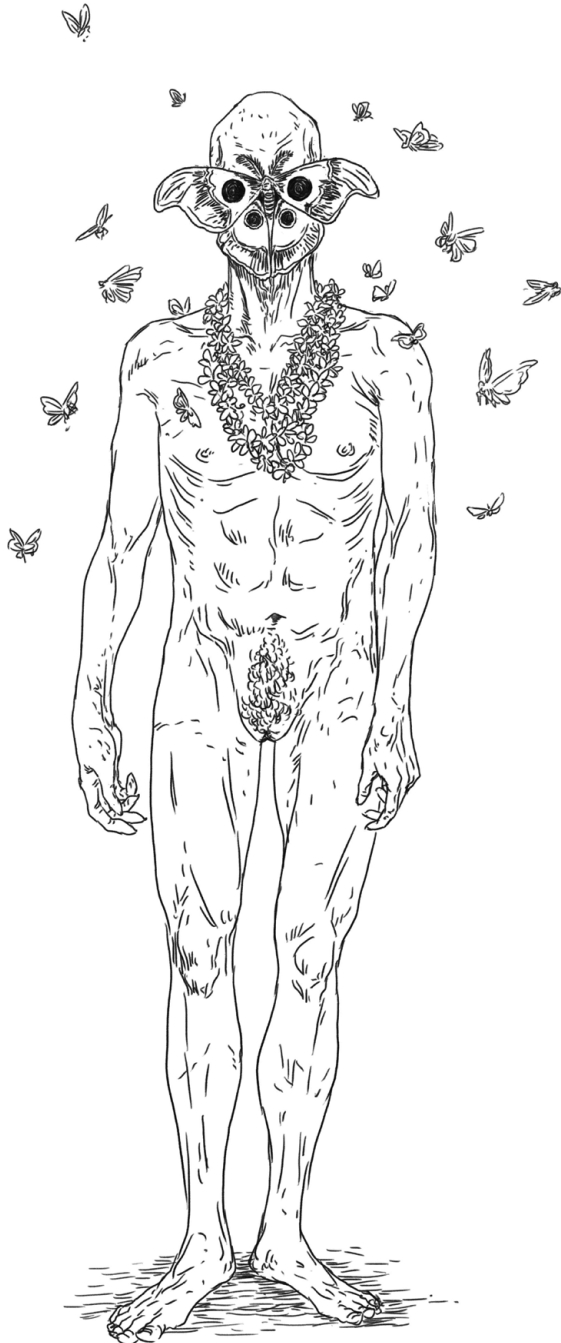


QUICK HONEY

Mercury oozes from golden combs. A taste grants invulnerability and unerring action for a single day, and death immediately after.

The people use it as blow-dart poison. Gods across the isles consider it a delicacy, and will pay well to have it at their table.

THE MOTH

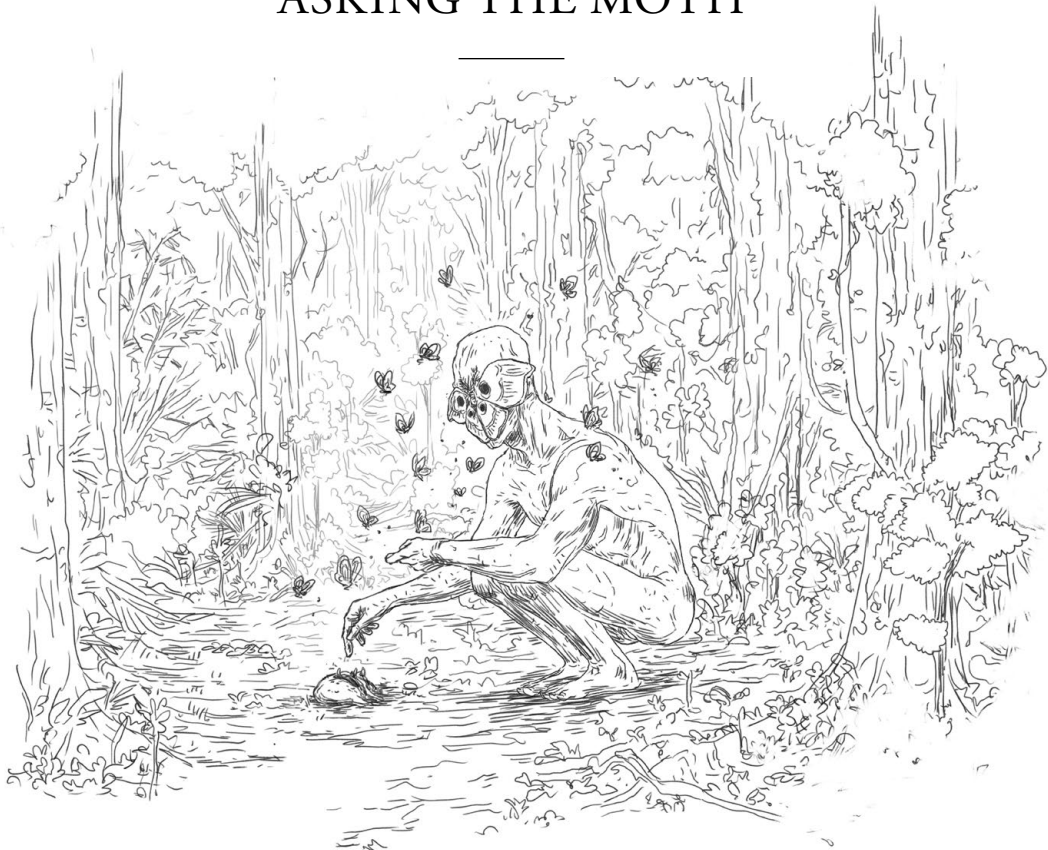


Both the youngest of the gods, and oldest. Governs death.

To be in the time of the moth is to be dead. The people do no burials. Songs to honour grief and ease dying, yes -- but once breath leaves the body there is nothing left. Cover the corpse with a pandanus mat, maybe. The moth sorts out the rest.

Manifests as tall and sexless. A moth for a face. They see out of the spots on its wings, and the spots of all other moths. They smell of night flowers. All other sounds cease in their presence.

ASKING THE MOTH



Comes for all that die within forest borders. Studies every single one. Able to accurately parrot their voice, their personality; what they knew, when alive.

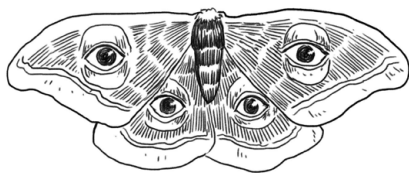
But since their soul is gone -- whoever the moth god portrays is a psychopath. You could query the dead. It will cost you. "No good," Wingseed says. "Do no good."

A WAY OUT OF THE FOREST



The same way you came in. Have the flowering tree on your left, and the dead tree on your right.

The forest is correct; it is the outside world that is out of step. Whenever you leave, it has been however long you were in the forest, plus d100 days.



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